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Students are faced with many subjects related to death in their everyday lives--war, euthanasia, disease, teenage suicide. A unit on death that focuses on literary and artistic conceptions of death, as well as historical trends concerning beliefs about death and burial, can help students express their feelings about death coherently and creatively, and evaluate various viewpoints rationally and logically while studying a significant subject. The unit might include the study of poetry with death as its subject, such as W. C. Bryant's "Thanatopsis," or John Keats' "When I Have Fears." Students can visit local cemeteries and make gravestone rubbings, note interesting epitaphs, and discover historical trends in the design of gravestones. Bulletin boards and other visuals can be designed in keeping with the topic, and students can discuss issues related to death and dying, such as whether death has lost its dignity and become institutionalized and dehumanized. Students can be assigned pertinent novels, such as James Agee's "A Death in the Family," or John Gunther's "Death Be Not Proud." They may also find the study of various cultures' treatments of death interesting, or may wish to try writing epitaphs for themselves or for famous people. The study of death can be an important way for students to learn to express themselves. (JC)

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THANATOLOGY: A THEMATIC APPROACH TO TEACHING

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THANATOLOGY: A THEMATIC APPROACH TO TEACHING

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Millay's candle burning at both ends and Macbeth's "brief candle" signify the brevity of life and the inevitability of death. Through the ages writers have viewed death in many ways: as a welcome release from life's prison, as a peaceful sleep after pain, as a religious experience, as a threatening force, and always as the unavoidable journey Everyman must make.

The contemplation of death brings a variety of moods: Gray's mournful lament in the small Stoke Poges churchyard; Tennyson's desire to sail beyond the sunset for the Happy Isles; Keats's fears on the "shore of the wide world" where he stood alone; Browning's eagerness to fight death and join Elizabeth and God; an athlete that died young; the death of a salesman; the literary suicides of Romeo and Juliet; Richard Cory, who went home one calm summer night and put a bullet through his head. Even John Donne kept a picture of himself in his shroud in a prominent place as a constant reminder to stay on the straight and narrow.

There is much literature--both poetry and prose--reflecting views on death with varying degrees of elegiac tones. The older elegies had pastoral qualities because the Greek gods represented themselves as singing shepherds. As time passed, perspectives on death varied widely.

Related to the early stages of romanticism in the eighteenth Century, a group of "graveyard school" poets wrote long, gloomy poems on death and immortality to call up the horrors of death and the odor of the charnel house. Of these poems, Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" was perhaps the most famous in England. In America, Philip Freneau's "The House

of Night" and William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis" were the outstanding ones. In the Nineteenth Century, Walt Whitman wrote about Lincoln in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd", probably America's most famous elegy.

Robert Snowden, in a cemetery with his mother once asked, "Mom, where are all the bad people buried?"

In the Memphis Commercial Appeal a cartoon of "The Ryatts" once showed Missy and Winky with their dad in a cemetery. Missy added a wistful note by saying, "When we visit Grandad's grave, it makes me all lonesome in my throat."

Each person, then, is a creature of many moods and emotions. Each student today is faced constantly with such life-and-death concerns as war, euthanasia, disease, accidents, drugs, the growing rate of teenage suicides, violence in the media, and the entire ecological unbalance.

John Donne once wrote that all "art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men, /And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell."

How, therefore, can one escape the inescapable?

Because of the universality of death, the quest for relevance in a challenging age, and the need to formulate a proper perspective about such an important subject, this unit on thanatology was born. Within the plan are materials and methods applicable to a wide range of interests and abilities. It is not advisable, nor even feasible, to include in one unit all the things mentioned below. Consider, juggle, add, delete until you are satisfied with a workable plan for your situation.

Consider the following literary selections:

Novels--A Death in the Family, James Agee; Death, Be Not Proud, John Gunther; As I Lay Dying, William Faulkner; The Loved One, Evelyn Waugh; Deathman, Do Not Follow Me, Jay Bennett; Death at an Early Age, Jonathan Kozol; For Whom the Bell Tolls, Ernest Hemingway.

Drama--The Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller.

Short Stories—"Death in the Afternoon," Ernest Hemingway; "The Dead," James Joyce.

Poems--"Death, Be Not Proud," John Donne; "To an Athlete Dying Young," A. E. Housman; "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," Emily Dickinson; "Thanatopsis," William Cullen Bryant; "I Have a Rendezvous with Death," Alan Seeger; "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," Dylan Thomas; "The Death of the Hired Man," Robert Frost; "When I Have Fears," John Keats; "Euology to Martin Luther King"; "The Pardoner's Tale," Chaucer; "Gareth and Lynette," Tennyson; "Prospice," Robert Browning; "Crossing the Bar," Tennyson; "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," Whitman; "Spoon River Anthology," Edgar Lee Masters; "Elegy in a Country Churchyard," Thomas Gray; and Ballads (with Death as theme).

Some Methods and Activities

1. Bulletin boards and other visuals set the mood. Artists can give artistic interpretations of certain poems or short stories. Imagine a black background with a stark white skeleton skull on it or with tombstones to create a "wall" cemetery. Establish a committee of students with a chairperson and let them use their ideas (maybe with some of your suggestions to launch them).

2. Discussion can launch and sustain interest. Consider these subjects: death symbols; why black for death? other symbolic colors; flowers that symbolize death; why funerals are sad and music sonorous; whether graves are always six-feet deep; why Ben Johnson was buried standing up; why Indians were buried on horses upside down; cost of funerals; views of immortality (Wordsworth, Bridey Murphy, for example); whether the act of dying has lost its dignity and normalcy and become institutionalized, dehumanized and mechanized; how young people are excluded or sheltered from such experiences; euthanasia; myths about death; how the saying "He's so crooked he'd steal the nickels off a dead man's eyes" got started; elegy vs.

eulogy; wakes; country vs. city customs and cemeteries; religious beliefs reflected in Egyptian pyramids, New Orleans jazz funerals, and Greek drama; the tavern representing death; pet cemeteries.

3. Cemetery rubbings can be exciting. To make the rubbing, secure paper with masking tape over a section of a tombstone and rub lightly with a crayon until the image or the inscription is transferred from the stone to the paper (as rubbing over a penny will transfer the face of Lincoln to the paper). Rubbings of doves, lilies, cherubs, willow trees, and urns can become colorful visuals for bulletin boards or walls. The local graveyard is a source of history. Doves were in vogue at one time; angels, another. Ways of spelling have changed with the years. Monuments are stories in stone.

4. Epitaphs can be humorous or serious; inspiring or heart-rending. Have students jot down some local epitaphs. (For optional credit, assign five rubbings and ten epitaphs.)

Stonecutters' spellings often give some choice bits, such as: "Lord, she is thin." (an E omitted); "My glass is rum;" "Gone to be an angle."

On the monument over the grave of Thomas Wolfe at Asheville, N.C,, appear these lines: "The last voyage, the longest, the best" from "Look Homeward Angel."

John Keats requested his own epitaph: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

Shakespeare's epitaph: "Blest be he that spares these stones, and curst be he that moves these bones." Does this explain why his grave has never been bothered?

David Frost often asked a guest, "What would you like your tombstone to say about you?"

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, wrote this epitaph for Charles II: "Here lies our sovereign Lord the King/Whose word no man relies on,/Who never said a foolish thing,/Nor ever did a wise one."

Let students write some poetic epitaphs. Let them try writing epitaphs for Robert Frost, William Faulkner, Carl Sandburg, John Kennedy, or Ernest Hemingway. Also, perhaps they can draw some conclusions about changing fashions and spelling in epitaphs. Spelling examples: lyes, dyed. Search for unusual names, many reflecting Biblical connections like Dorcas, Jesse, Ebenezer, Ichabod, Jerusha, Ezra, and Abel.

5. Comparison of epitaphs can spark interest. Let students compare Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River Anthology" with Ben Johnson's "Epitaph on Elizabeth, L. H." or "On My First Son."

6. Join forces (perhaps with a civic group) to help restore the aged beauty of a local cemetery choked with weeds and threatened by human neglect.

7. Try poem analysis. This may be a short poem such as Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" or John Keats "When I Have Fears."

For a more challenging assignment, compare two poems giving their authors' views of death. For instance, compare Browning's "Prospice" with Tennyson's "Crossing the Bar."

8. Research funeral and burial customs. Interview old-timers in your locale. New Orleans jazz funerals, wakes, the death of Abe Lincoln or Cleopatra, or the tribal customs in various times and places make interesting subjects. Compare old and new cemeteries, sculpture, changing fashions in funeral music.

9. Songs related to death will interest young students. "Deep River," "Danny Boy," "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," "Taps," and folk

ballads illustrate death themes in music. They run through classical, jazz, folk, and modern--from Requiem Mass through black spirituals. Let students play, sing, or tape music or read a poem to accompany background music.

10. Visits to cemeteries are popular field trips.

11. Speakers may be invited to the class (funeral directors, doctors, lawyers, musicians, artists, ministers, psychologists, or soldiers).

12. Try dramatizations: Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man," the last death scene in "Romeo and Juliet," the cemetery scene in "Our Town" with black umbrellas and Emily in her white dress, the death of Ophelia, Bonnie Blue in Gone With the Wind, cuttings from Death of a Salesman, or The Red Badge of Courage, and a scene from London's "To Build a Fire,"--all show reactions to death.

Another idea: Make cardboard tombstones, let students lie in "Grave" behind them and rise individually (as Hemingway, Poe, Keats, or whatever author the student selects) talk and then lie back into the grave. This can be an effective dramatic presentation. Spotlights can move from one "grave" to another in the "classroom cemetery." The students dress accordingly.

13. Research famous last words of famous people. For instance, Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) ran to greet his daughter and granddaughter, "Hi, ho!", he called gaily as he came to a low hedge. "Over we go!" He jumped and fell dead on the other side. A note in his jacket read, "Weep bitterly for the dead."

Whether it is silver-misted rain in Grover's Corners or deep purple twilight in the Stoke Poges churchyard, whether it is the lonely whistle of a far-off train through the night or the melancholy complaining of an owl from a church steeple, sights and sounds deeply affect one's emotions.

Death itself is a highly emotional and inescapable experience for beggars and kings, princes and paupers, for all humanity. A unit on thanatology will help students express thoughts about death coherently and creatively, evaluate various viewpoints rationally and logically, and enjoy the quest for more information and insight into a significant subject.